

## INTERVIEW WITH S.I. MARTIN

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*Conducted by Chris Campbell and Leila Kamali on*

*8 March 2004, Brixton, South London*

Leila Kamali (LK) *Was Incomparable World written here in Brixton?*

S.I. Martin (SIM) No, it was written up in Camden Town.

LK *Camden would of course have been more significant than Brixton to the eighteenth-century experience of London, because it was at that time more central to the shape of the city.*

Chris Campbell (CC) *Brixton would have been a village then.*

SIM Very much a village. But, I've done some research in the archives in Brixton, and I've found signs of black people living here in the 1720s, so even when Brixton was a village, the black presence was still around.

LK *In the context of the history of black British literature, I think, Chris, in your paper, you drew some parallels between Incomparable World<sup>1</sup> and The Lonely Londoners,<sup>2</sup> which might be something we could talk about.*

1. S.I. Martin, *Incomparable World*, London, Quartet Books, 1996.

2. Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, New York, Longman Caribbean Writers Series, 1985. First published by Alan Wingate, London, 1956, this novel about the experiences of a group of immigrants who become friends in London is often acknowledged as the first 'Black British' novel.

3. Claude McKay, *Banjo*, London, X Press, 2000. First published by Harper & Brothers, New York, 1929.

SIM Well there are definite comparisons. I should start by saying that my immediate subconscious prompt for writing this, which I only realised in retrospect - was reading Claude McKay's *Banjo*,<sup>3</sup> which is set in the docks in Marseille in the 1920s, and you have black sailors, from all over the African diaspora, who are trapped in Marseille, as it were, some by choice, some just drifting. And it's the conversation about the diaspora, the conversation about themselves, as people remaking themselves in a new environment, and the conversation about the joys and perils of living in this environment, that really is something which just reverberated in me, and I think it was a big part of the inspiration for writing *Incomparable World*.

Similarly, something in Selvon's work, his whole sense of this new community - what he's talking about isn't simply the people of Caribbean origin, the Trinidadians or the Jamaicans, he's also talking about people like Cap, for example, who's an African, a Nigerian, and there's that whole dialogue and area for misunderstanding. What he's describing is a whole new world that's being generated by the conversations between these different groups of people from throughout the African diaspora. This is something which I think is a recurring theme in the history of peoples of colour in Britain. For example, if you go back to the time of *Incomparable*

*World*, you can see that there are all these communities, as the archives will tell us, communities of people who hail from West Africa, who hail from the Caribbean, and also by the 1780s you have people who have already been here a generation. And these people from all over the African diaspora are here dealing with the issue of being *visible* foreigners in imperial Britain, and trying to make sense of themselves, and of London, and it's what comes out of that.

What came out of that, in a real way, was the Abolitionist struggle. Again, in the Abolitionist struggle, black writers like Cuguano and Equiano<sup>4</sup> featured very prominently, and Ignatius Sancho<sup>5</sup> was used as a 'poster boy' for the whole Abolitionist emancipatory movement. Then again at the turn of the twentieth century, you have the Pan African conference,<sup>6</sup> held in Westminster. This is a result of the efforts of the people from all different origins in the diaspora, who are located in London. And that is what interests me - it's what comes out of these conversations, and all this cultural activity, which unfortunately only happens in the belly of the beast.

CC *It's an interesting flip, if you consider that part of the mission of British colonialism was to go abroad and impose boundaries where they had never previously existed. In order to overcome that, in a way, you get the after-effect which is the various diasporas recreating new communities, it's an interesting, ironic flip, almost. You mentioned Sancho as a sort of poster boy - could we perhaps talk about the portrayal of Cuguano, Equiano and Sancho in the novel itself?*

SIM Well primarily I wanted to demystify them, demythologise them, because too often in literatures of 'peoples of colour', especially when dealing with historical or noteworthy figures, there is that attempt to mythologise, so that everyone has to be perfect, they have to be church-going, god-fearing, beyond reproach. I wanted Equiano, who is one of my heroes, to come across as someone that people could relate to, so I wanted him to be imperious and haughty, and standoffish, and maybe a bit vain, and critical and contradictory - I wanted him to be *human*, rather than the Equiano which has been built up by history departments as this person beyond reproach - which apart from being untrue, is *boring*! Similarly, with Cuguano, obviously I was taking liberties with him - I think I described him as having a 'prematurely aged face like a well-whipped slave' or something, but it was just to bring him into focus, rather than having all these ethereal figures who are simply worthy.

LK *And when you're imagining that period in which these people were living, and only just after the death of Sancho, you would expect the community to be involved in gossip about these figures.*

SIM Yes, in such a tiny community, people would have known each other just by the nature of London life - it's a city of villagers - and there would have been gossip all over the place.

4. Ottobah Cuguano and Olaudah Equiano, ex-slaves, Abolitionists, and authors of two of the earliest slave narratives in English, entitled respectively *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, (published in 1787), and *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African, written by himself* (published in 1789).

5. Born on a slave-ship and raised in England, Ignatius Sancho became friend and a regular correspondent with the writers Samuel Johnson and Laurence Sterne, and the actor David Garrick. His *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho* were published in 1782.

6. Held in July 1900, and organised by Henry Sylvester Williams, a London barrister born in Trinidad, this conference brought together representatives from Africa, North America, the West Indies and London, with the aim of allowing black people to discuss the condition of the black race around the world, and was the forerunner to the six Pan-African Congresses held between 1919 and 1974.

CC *It's quite interesting, I was walking up to the tube station in Fulham the other day, and there was a street vendor with all the posters out on the pavement, and you get your usual pop stars, celebrities, five or six posters of Bob Marley, and then one of Equiano! Is this indicative that perhaps these early Black British writers are now being iconified again?*

SIM This is something which is happening. It's good. Literature is not going to be the primary avenue of education in what is basically a semi-literate culture. The work of people like Equiano and Sancho and Cuguano is going to start filtering into schools. I'm doing a lot of that most of the time, and maybe in schools literature more than history can be a vehicle for introducing these ideas because history for people brought up on television is very distant.

LK *You've been active in promoting the inclusion of Britain's role in the slave trade in school curricula. What else are you up to?*

SIM Oh, masses, masses. I've done stuff with the London Tourist Board, putting together all these brochures on 'Black London', and I also work with the - I'm not proud to say - the local government propaganda department! I've just finished a book for Southwark Council on St George's Day and Englishness, which is probably the maddest thing I've ever done! And I'm working in the Black Cultural Archives, putting together an exhibition on black Mayors and Aldermen, and I'm working as well with the Museum in Docklands, posting a series of black films from the early part of the twentieth century, showing the black presence in Britain, and redoing one of their Thames Galleries, to feature the black populations and the story of the West Indian trade in regard to the Docks. So, all sorts of things, some mad, some very, very satisfying.

CC *Working on many different fronts towards the same direction.*

7. S.I. Martin,  
*Britain's Slave Trade*,  
Channel 4 Books,  
London &  
Basingstoke,  
Macmillan  
Publishers Ltd,  
1999.

LK *And you produced the book on Britain's Slave Trade,<sup>7</sup> in conjunction with Channel 4 - how did that come about?*

SIM Messily! I was invited by Trevor Phillips to write the book on the slave trade, to accompany the Channel 4 series. They were supposed to run in tandem, to be produced in tandem, but it being television, and me being a complete novice in that medium, I didn't realise that I was supposed to have written the book before the first frame had been shot! So that was interesting! It wasn't a made-for-TV book, it was basically an introduction to the slave trade for people who weren't familiar with it.

CC *Again a very important step in visualising the forgotten history of Britain as a whole, and of London.*

SIM Yes. It's particularly important in London, because London sort of basks in this amnesia by which the slave trade is something which happened in Liverpool and in Bristol, but somehow the brunt of it wasn't borne by London. And of course financially it was, in terms of the insurance companies. Lloyds of London itself sprung up on the back of the slave trade. The banking system itself, such as Barings Bank, Barclays - David and Alexander Barclay, and Martins Bank - no relation - which went on to become part of NatWest - actually Martins was started in Bristol. But London was where all these currents of money conjoined - and currents of influence as well. Because people forget the sheer power of the planters' lobby. There's one report in *Gentleman's Magazine*, from the eighteenth century, which says that there are 'upwards of 40 members now sitting in the House who are either West Indian planters, the sons thereof, or have connections thereto, which entitle them to such pre-eminence', a huge block of power sitting there, bringing us people like Britain's first millionaire, the Beckford family, lots of the National Trust properties as well, like Harewood House, from the Lascelles family, the Georgian House in Bristol, from the Pinney family. I mean we're literally walking in it - it's not like it's gone - all this money, the £20 million which was paid off to the slave-owners following Emancipation in 1833. That all went somewhere, it was invested somewhere, spent somewhere, and we're walking around in the product.

CC *And it's been used to promote an image of 'Heritage England' - the prettified history - and the irony of that is sharp.*

SIM Yes, very, very sharp. They literally remade themselves, this is something which interested me, people like Asariah Pinney, who was part of Monmouth's Rebellion - he got kicked out of the country, and ended up in St Kitts and Nevis, the lowest of the low as far as white people are concerned. In a generation or so his family are slave owners *par excellence*, and they come back to Britain, and they're setting trends in taste and style, in Italianate design, in literature - Gothic literature, all sorts of stuff they're just buying into, trying to buy their way into society.

CC *It's almost a colonial version of the American dream, that you have to colonise in order to create yourself, you use the colony to manifest destiny.*

LK *Speaking of this British amnesia of Empire, we hear a lot about the various cosmopolitan influences that flow into the capital, but there isn't so much thought, as you say, about what the capital has sucked into itself! The two come together. The benefits of multicultural influences, which make the capital a vibrant city, also come at a cost. I suppose the contemporary city doesn't always want to remember that.*

SIM No. But what's interesting is that there's another sort of memory, which I thought people would have huge problems with. Going back to the slave

trade book, the geneticist, Dr Steve Jones, was involved in putting that package together, trying to sell it, and he came up with the statistic that 20 per cent of the apparently-white British population could trace their ancestry back to the eighteenth century, Georgian London late eighteenth century, and would have had to have had an ancestor of black African origin, you know allowing for deaths and migration and so on. I thought that would go down like a lead balloon! Sometimes I wish it had!

But in a sense this is where it gets really interesting. I've met people, such as the Affleck family, the blondest, most blue-eyed people, very nice family, and their ancestor was William Affleck, the soldier in the Napoleonic Wars, very highly decorated infantryman, and he died in the Strand Poorhouse. They discovered they had this black ancestor, and they're throwing themselves with a passion, you know a real eccentric English passion, into digging up everything they can find about this black ancestor. But I have to say I'm slightly uncomfortable, because I'm not really used to it, and also I have a slight suspicion of what are people who look white going to be doing with black history? This brings up serious issues, of identity, origins, ethnicity, how black Britishness, and Englishness, are constructed.

LK *The novel is striking for being rooted in a profound knowledge of the history, and it almost seems that you excavate history that no one else has. Did you find that you were discovering material from the archives that other people hadn't written about?*

SIM Yes there was stuff in the archives. I mean, archival research is where this subject comes into its own, because we have only begun to scratch the very surface of this. I spent a year and a half in Lambeth Archives, about three years ago. I was actually working for the Council, looking through their material, and there's just masses and masses and masses of stuff. It will be a good thirty or forty years before there's a body of knowledge where we will feel that we can move forward. But I love doing that - there's lots of stuff in the archives, but there's also lots of stuff that's already been written. There was Scobie's *Black Britannica*, there's Peter Fryer, there's James Walvin, Folarin Shyllon.<sup>8</sup>

CC *On this question of research, the novel derives a lot of its power from its vivid portrayal of eighteenth-century life, certainly in terms of fashion, the descriptions of food, and the customs. Could you say a bit more about this sort of 'reality effect' - how you researched that, where the sources stopped and the imagination began?*

SIM I think you've got it in a nutshell in the phrase 'reality effect', because I often speak with people about historical matters, and there's always this cliché, that's totally erroneous: 'oh, times may change, but people are fundamentally the same, we feel the same, we react the same'. *We do not!* We do not. It's a very 'chronocentric', as I call it, view. People today can't even

8. Edward Scobie, *Black Britannia: A History of Blacks in Britain*, Chicago, Johnson Pub Co., 1972; Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, London, Pluto Press, 1984; James Walvin, *The Black Presence: A Documentary History of the Negro in England 1550-1860*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973; F.O. Shyllon, *Black People in Britain 1555-1833*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977.

begin to *imagine* the choices, the possibilities, the feel of life, for someone in the eighteenth century. For example, let's talk about high society. It would be totally normal, you'd be expected, as a gentleman going out to dinner, to drink three bottles of port during dinner, and hold a conversation, demonstrating a good grasp of classical allusion, and allegory, vulgarity, and then get up in the morning, in the tradition that you read of in Pepys,<sup>9</sup> where he wakes up and drinks a pint of wine, before going off to his demanding job at the Admiralty, where he despatches effortlessly a 16-page report as well as other correspondence, and this is just in a morning. Then he goes on and has this huge lunch, and then he comes back, and meets a prostitute on the way back, and - this is a normal life! I mean, even when you look at society at its lowest levels in the eighteenth century as well, you find this - now they've got the Old Bailey records online,<sup>10</sup> and you can see, not just the vocabulary people had, ordinary people had, but the facility they had with it, and you just realise they were *switched on*. Unless they were chronically ill, they had to be switched on, all the time, mentally and physically, because your life depended on your strength of arms and your presence of mind. And this is something that I think is just amazing, that sense of possibilities and facility of language, and just basic skills that people do not have nowadays.

9. *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* spans the years 1660-1669.

10. [www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org)

LK *I think that a sense of that multiplicity of skills required to survive in eighteenth-century London comes across very strongly in the style of your writing as well, the density of detail in your writing.*

SIM One thing that is often missing from historical writing is that sense of place. There is no real setting, and a lot of it is very conversational. But for me, what's magical about the historical setting is that it has its own life, and this life is a mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar, and that's the sense that I always try to tap into. For example, when Buckram walks with the beggars up Oxford Street, and they're passing all of the firearms, and the polished brass, and the glassware, and the pineapples and exotic fruits, and here they are, a group of beggars from the other side of the planet, come from slavery or god knows what, just shuffling along in their rags to get this handout at this place which is just off the Edgware Road. But yet in that turning round the Edgware Road, past the Chapel Hill turnpike, they're in a whole other universe - it's rural, and behind them you've got the hot air balloons rising as well, one silver, one turquoise, one some other colour. I wanted to try and capture that feeling of a lot of very different things happening at once, all the time.

CC *At the conclusion to the novel, we leave with Buckram departing this very homosocial world of London and heading for family life in 'the heart of England', Staffordshire. Could you comment on this idea of the vision of rurality, the perception of the world outside the city as a possible escape?*

SIM Well, yes, obviously, he's leaving the city for its diametric opposite - leaving somewhere which has been familiar to the level of intimacy. And it's a place where he has structures, which is itself structured, and here he is going out to this white landscape, leaving behind everything he's ever known, into a place where he will be absolutely a physical minority. It was a place for me to add some shock value as well. He had to recreate himself again, into the 'heart of England', into whoever he becomes outside of the city. He'll have to be a much different person.

LK *You do seem, in both the characters of Buckram and William, to assert the right of the immigrant, for want of a better word, to claim Britain as a home. Especially, for example, in the passage towards the end of the novel, where William is dreaming of chestnuts roasting in Covent Garden, and he refers to London as 'back home', when in fact he's only been there in London for two years.*

SIM This is what the William character was all about. He's driven by principle - he wants to be back with his family, but it's a force, not a feeling. What he's actually feeling is passion for being in a place where he's allowed to have ideas, where he's allowed to read newspapers, where he can express himself in all sorts of different ways, that's what he's actually feeling. What he's feeling is excitement and passion for London.

There's one scene, when they're in the Golden Lion, I think, and Buckram just realises that William actually loves it here - he's happy, he's found somewhere that he can relate to. And yes, there's that deal that has to be struck between their own fidelity to themselves and their honest feelings about where they are.

Again, Selvon is good at this. His descriptions of Moses, Galahad, Cap and the lads just coasting down to Piccadilly Circus, to Eros. There's this fantastic passage of unbroken prose in *The Lonely Londoners*, where he's describing summertime in the city,<sup>11</sup> and it's as if the characters can claim a sense of place out of this paradoxical freedom. Paradoxical because it is a brand of freedom which they can only enjoy in 'the belly of the beast', as it were - at the colonial centre.

11. Selvon, op. cit., pp101-110.

So for William, London becomes the place where he finds he can choose his own roles, he needs no mediator. Buckram, on the other hand, needs to be led through print - the literate London is not accessible to him, and too often makes him feel, until he himself learns to read, that he doesn't exist.

LK *So literacy is involved in the performance of identity for these characters in London.*

CC *One of the novel's most striking and powerful, also puzzling, images, is that of*



*the bloodied dried rags that Buckram finds under Charlotte's bed - are they weirdly symbolic or is it a narrative red herring?*

SIM Very much a red herring! They're just there basically to throw the reader off. But in another sense, yes and no, because here is a woman who clearly has some obsessive record-keeping of her cycle, and there's a hint at a larger, messier, crazier character, underneath the primness that Charlotte presents, which indicates that she actually does have some inner, unexplored, misunderstood life. But, no, I sort of wish I'd never done that now!

LK *Your novel has been called 'a welcome venture bridging the gap between high-brow and popular novels' - did you imagine a particular readership when you were writing?*

SIM Yes, and I wrongly imagined it would be exactly as that says - being able to bridge between high and low-brow, for want of much better descriptions, but that's not the way it goes. The vast majority of these copies of *Incomparable World* seem to have found themselves onto coffee-tables in Hampstead. I mean, I'm glad I wrote the novel, but it's just not what I would have chosen. Also the methods of distribution, and the nature of the publishing company that I was in peonage to was going to decide where the book was distributed to and how.

CC *In that sense, it's an interesting literary companion piece to Peter Fryer's Staying Power. The opening line of Staying Power, which I think is brilliant, is that 'There were Africans in Britain before the English came here'.<sup>12</sup> Was it important that Incomparable World became a literary landmark in realising that?*

SIM Yes, I absolutely did want to establish the fact of the black presence before the Windrush in June 1948.<sup>13</sup> If there was one thing I wanted to establish more than anything else it was that, yes.

LK *I'm particularly interested in the special dynamic in your work between land and sea, and how that relates to our understanding of the 'Black Atlantic'.<sup>14</sup> The sea does seem to be constantly present in the book, and also in the excerpt from your forthcoming work that appeared in Wasafiri a few years ago.<sup>15</sup> Even in that short piece, there is some reference to the life divided between land and sea. Was that consciously following a 'Black Atlantic' tradition, or was it doing something else?*

SIM No it was unconsciously following it! Seriously, it can't be avoided, that's sort of your nature, literally, between two elements, between two places, between two ways of being. And on a more down-to-earth level as well, here were people who were just incredible travellers - given the time and place, the voyages they took, both emotionally, and across the Atlantic world, were phenomenal. Remember that in most of the societies that they were visiting,

12. Fryer, op. cit., p1.

13. Between the late 1940s and late 1950s, in response to a call from the British government for labour from the colonies, around 125,000 people came to Britain from the Caribbean islands. The *Empire Windrush* docked at Tilbury on 22 June 1948, bringing 492 Jamaicans to Britain, and is seen as emblematic of this era of immigration.

14. A term coined by Paul Gilroy in his book, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*, London, Verso, 1993, indicating a supranational system of cultural exchange, and locus for black identity, based upon the historical routes of the slave trade between Africa, the Caribbean, North America, and Europe.

15. S.I. Martin, 'All One Word', in *Wasafiri*, Autumn 2000, no. 32: 27-29.



if they were active as seamen, they could have been considered a species of property. In the novel, when William is floating out to sea off the coast of Brazil, he's aware that this is an ocean that has contained the bones of so many countless dead, those bones which will be forever floating around between one part of the Atlantic and another, but never touching either shore. The whole Atlantic nature of modern people is what I was really talking about. I think that it's something that's important to take on board, that whole Atlantic world idea, which is the only idea of Paul Gilroy's that I can be bothered with! But it's very serious, and it stands, it stands up.

*CC At a writing session held at Warwick University last week, with Derek Walcott and David Dabydeen, Dabydeen commented in his usual inflammatory way, that he found 'writing about race boring', and he then went on to say he didn't want to become another Jew always writing about the Holocaust. I remember a couple of years previously, Fred D'Aguiar positioning himself slightly differently, and saying that his position was like that of an oarsman of a rowing boat, in that in order to move forward, you have to be looking back at where you've come from. How do these two statements sit with your work, and is there a need for Black British writing, whatever that may be, to narrate itself out of the slave-ship?*

**SIM** Well first of all I don't think that Fred and David's positions are mutually exclusive at all. There's a very ancient African cultural object and work *sankofa*, meaning to move ahead into the future while looking at the past, symbolised by a bird, whose body is moving forward, but its head is turned toward the past, so you're using the past to steer your way forward. But why can't you do it with humour? And why can't you do it with insight and humanity? So much of our literature from the African diaspora, in terms of printed matter, comes from North America. I think there's been a dreadful tradition of po-faced, puritanical, redemptory literature which has come out of that part of the world, and that's influenced a lot of the stuff which comes out here as well. You know, people always have to be, if they're not complete gangsters, junkies and muggers and rapists, then they have to be models of probity.

*CC Equiano figures!*

**SIM** Yes. The fantastic thing is that these people were incomplete, and it's their very incompleteness which gives power to what they've done, and makes them human. You know, the fact that a group of slaves, ex-slaves many of them, living in London in the eighteenth century, could combine and become the 'sons of Africa', that many of them would be published, and one of them would die extremely wealthy. You have some very ordinary, talented people who are the stuff of history - there aren't any mythical god-like figures. And I think it's important, not just to pull them down for the hell of it, but to relate to them. You're not supposed to relate to a mythical figure - you're

supposed to take example.

LK *I suppose Black British and African-American contemporary literature is a little bit thin on the ground on humour and comic creation, but on the other hand, humour was central to the work of Sam Selvon, who is seen as one of the ancestors of Black British literature.*

CC *And the humour is totally linked to the power of the writing - in no way does it lighten the message. We think of Derek Walcott as a serious poet, but if you read his plays they're hilarious, and yet somehow that gets bleached out, or pushed to one side. I wonder if that's the fault of critics as much as the writers.*

SIM Well the expectation has been built up for a lot of these writers. I mean, I know Fred, I know he's full of humour, a fellow of infinite jest! Yet when critics address his *Mama Dot* poems, there's this expectation that 'the black poet' has to have that kind of [West Indian] intonation, and be constantly talking about struggle - I mean please! It's a danger that a lot of literature, but particularly literatures of the African diaspora fall into.

LK *In fact, I recently read somewhere, a passing mention of you which commented that your work is 'almost too British sounding'!*

SIM Oh yes! I've heard that one! I know exactly what it means! Of course, there is a huge school of thought which is not just looking for, but actually *demands*, and is disappointed if these recognisably contemporary 'street' qualities aren't present in black writing. Now, the fact that I'm writing about eighteenth-century London, when the average scullery maid would have been a hell of a sight more articulate than the average reviewer of the twenty-first century, doesn't matter! They need to see all the tropes, they need to see imbeciles and clowns, and they need to have certain things satisfied in themselves. Yes, I've come across that before. I mean, what would it take to satisfy them, what are they looking for? That is the more important question - what would they need from a black novel, to be satisfied as a white reader? The answer to that is the interesting thing.

LK *Could you talk about your forthcoming work?*

SIM Not very well! I've been so pulled apart with doing this propaganda project, and all the museum work, that I'm still literally just dabbling at it, tapping it here, and knocking it about there, trying to take it for a walk, putting it back in its kennel. So there's nothing I could say which would not break the spell, because the spell would be broken.

CC *The lives of the protagonists in Incomparable World are played out against this spectre of relocation - the Sierra Leone Resettlement Scheme<sup>16</sup> - and this idea of*

16. A disastrous attempt by Abolitionists and the British government, in 1786, to settle some of London's poor blacks in Sierra Leone; 750 black people were expected to be deported, but because of administrative difficulties, corruption, disease, and poor planning, only 350 sailed, almost two-thirds of whom subsequently died, or were recaptured into slavery.

*repatriation, which has been a populist political buzz-term of the 1970s and 80s. Could you perhaps comment on this thread of the novel in a wider context?*

SIM Well the knowledge of the possibility of relocation, or repatriation, is always the ultimate prohibition to any potential sense of belonging. Because again, it's not something which is new at all - it was there in 1596 and 1601, with Queen Elizabeth, it was there in 1786 with the Sierra Leone project, we saw it in the 1960s with the Rivers of Blood speech. So that's always been seen as a 'solution' to visible ethnic minority populations - you don't redistribute resources, or do anything rational, you just relocate the people, and then get rid of the problem. That is something which I think is very present in a lot of people's minds today, and it also added an edge, an additional pressure, to the circumstances under which these people lived in the 1780s - they could literally have been taken off the streets, or been obliged to sign up for this project. I was interested in finding out how people would have lived under those conditions.

CC *It seems to me that this idea of repatriation is no longer politically an acceptable stance, certainly for the Caribbean diaspora or the African diaspora. But in recent years we've seen the same vicious rhetoric directed at asylum seekers from the Middle East and Eastern Europe. What is it about mainstream white British society that fuels itself on this aggression against the easiest target, the most visible, the most recent arrivals - it seems that this book speaks as much to those communities today.*

SIM I think we need to also address the larger problem which is that - where do I start with this one now? This is quite painful. It's a horrible rite of passage, which I'm ashamed to say the population group that I am from has become involved in, by which one of the routes of claiming Englishness is by joining the pogrom. And it's a game which I don't think communities of colour can afford to play, because for instance, there's this research that has shown, that in the 1960s and 1970s and early 1980s, 40 per cent of the membership of the National Front, as it was then, was of Irish origin. There's also similar research looking at the Front National in France, and they have high numbers of Spanish and Italian second generation, who are only one generation away from having run away from Franco, yet they're voting for a fascist, racist party. Similarly with Irish people in Britain. I mean I live here, just down the road in Brixton, and the comments that I hear from young teenagers of African and Caribbean origin talking about 'these people in my country', with no irony at all! It's a game that I really don't think we can afford to play, because in another generation, these people from Croatia, and Latvia, and Poland, are not going to be visible, or even audible - they're going to vanish! And when people of Afro-Caribbean origins have been in Britain for four or five generations we will still be taking the flak. So it is a horrible rite of passage, very tragic.

LK *Will there ever be a film version of Incomparable World?*

SIM The idea has been knocked around - Trevor Phillips had the option for years, which was nice, money for nothing! But it's hard to say, I don't know, I mean I really just don't think about that sort of thing any more. I don't like the world of moving pictures anyway, so that would just drive me mad.